

## Colorado

### One School's Produce Market is Producing Kids with a Taste for Fruits and Vegetables

#### Challenge

Like other states, Colorado is facing a growing epidemic of obesity that affects adults and children alike. The problem is even more acute for particular groups. For example, nearly a quarter of low-income children (ages 2-5) in the state are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.\* A more healthful diet is an important step toward preventing overweight. But often, kids simply do not have enough access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

At Pioneer Elementary School in Lafayette, a small city on the northern outskirts of Denver, almost two-thirds of its approximately 320 students are in the school's free or reduced-price lunch program. That got teacher Isabelle Smith thinking: The program assumes that the meals these students eat at home meet minimum nutrition requirements. What if they do not? Smith asked kids what they ate for dinner, and their answers confirmed her suspicions: It was clear to her that a lot of kids needed more fruits and vegetables in their diet.

#### Response

Together with a parent of a student at Pioneer who was also a registered dietitian, Smith thought of ways the school could affordably and effectively get nutritious foods to students. That's when they hit on the idea of El Mercado ("The Market") – so named because Pioneer is a bilingual school. To fund the program, Smith applied for and received a grant from the Colorado Physical Activity and Nutrition (COPAN) Program, one of 28 state programs funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases.

Launched in 2004, the El Mercado program improves access to fresh fruits and vegetables for students at Pioneer Elementary School while teaching them real-life skills.

Now in its second year, the school's El Mercado program is encouraging students to make healthful choices about what they eat. It starts with Smith buying produce at a local supermarket, where she gets a bulk discount. Then every Monday around lunchtime, she sets up the market on the cafeteria stage and supervises members of the student leadership team who are "employed" there. In front of the blue wooden structure sit baskets of avocados, potatoes, onions, bananas, apples, and lots of other in-season fruits and vegetables for sale. The prices at El Mercado are low, but there's a catch: Students can only spend Pioneer Pesos or box tops.

And what are Pioneer Pesos? They are the coin of the realm at Pioneer. Students earn the pesos at school jobs like sharpening pencils and sorting books. Teachers post announcements for these jobs, and students have to fill out applications for the ones they want. At any time, there are 40 to 50 jobs available.

Once they've eaten most of their Monday lunch, students can go grocery shopping at the market. One peso will buy them five fruits or vegetables. Kids who don't have peso-producing jobs can use box tops, each of which buys a single fruit or vegetable.

"If you give the stuff away, they won't eat it," Smith says. "If it's in their lunchbox, they won't eat it. But if you sell it to them, they buy it and bring it home."

### Results

The grant from COPAN lasted only one year. But because El Mercado was so successful, Pioneer Elementary School found ways to keep the program running. This year, the market has been funded almost exclusively through the Box Tops for Education Program as well as by recycling printer cartridges through another outside organization.

About 20 percent of the students are regular customers at the market, purchasing between 150 and 200 pieces of produce a week. Other schools are taking notice: At least two have shown interest in starting produce markets of their own.

"El Mercado gives students the power to make a choice — to buy things on their own, to try something new," Smith says. "And the fruits and vegetables sell like hotcakes."



*Students can "buy" fresh fruits and vegetables at Pioneer Elementary School's produce market.*

#### What Else is Colorado Doing to Address Overweight and Obesity?

- Developed school and worksite resource kits that support healthful eating and active lifestyles.
- Created Colorado On the Move, a statewide physical activity campaign that encourages people to increase the number of steps they take every day.
- Partnered with Kaiser Permanente to develop Thriving Communities, a program that helps communities create local campaigns to improve nutrition and physical activity.

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